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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000901

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: COALITION LEADERS UNITED ON MESSAGE, ELECTIONS

REF: A. MINSK 875

[¶](#)B. MINSK 846

[¶](#)C. MINSK 853

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[¶](#)1. (C) The four leaders of the opposition coalition asked Ambassador to signal to the GOB that the international community would watch closely the planned November 4 Social March. They expressed relief that the recent visit by a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe official apparently did not portend GOB-EU dialogue without conditions. The leaders recognized the need to boost their popularity ratings through 2008 parliamentary elections in order to increase pressure on the regime to enter into negotiations. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (U) United Democratic Forces (UDF) Co-Chairs Anatoliy Lebedko, Anatoliy Levkovich, Vintsuk Vyachorka and Belarusian Party of Communists Deputy Yelena Skrigan (filling in for Sergey Kalyakin) joined Ambassador, DCM and Deputy Pol/Econ Chief for dinner on October 22 to welcome new Pol/Econ Chief to Minsk.

Will Dissatisfaction Turn into Activism?

[¶](#)3. (C) Discussing the October 14 European March (ref A) and the Social March planned for November 4, Skrigan said surveys (ref B) showed a majority of Belarusians supported the demonstrations. She added that social issues generated a greater public response than the abstract concept of European values, but admitted that this may not translate into active participation. Vyachorka warned that those most affected by decreased social spending were unaccustomed to actively promoting their interests. Skrigan said Lukashenko had called for a meeting on the eve of the Social March that may result in the rollback of some planned social benefits cuts. While this might drive down participation, it would allow organizers to claim they had successfully pressured the GOB, according to Skrigan.

Pushing the Regime into Meaningful Discussions

[¶](#)4. (C) All thanked Ambassador for the USG statement before the European March calling for restraint from Minsk. Similar announcements from the EU and the United States before the Social March would help protect demonstrators, Lebedko said. A series of successful events were necessary to raise the UDF's standing enough to draw the regime into negotiations.

Currently, according to Lebedko no one in the regime would admit to wanting talks with the opposition.

¶15. (C) On the heels of the visit of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Special Rapporteur for Belarus Andrea Rignoni, Lebedko worried that the EU would repeat the old mistake of confusing meaningless conversation between the regime and the opposition with serious constructive dialogue. Vyachorka expressed satisfaction that PACE was not considering readmission of Belarus to special guest status at this time. According to Vyachorka and others, the conditions for any dialogue must be clear - release of all political prisoners and parliamentary elections held according to OSCE standards. Any such dialogue would require a specific agenda and tight deadlines for agreement, argued Lebedko.

#### Active Election Monitoring Necessary

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¶16. (C) The Social March would help the opposition begin to reach out to the public on bread-and-butter issues well before next year's parliamentary elections, according to Lebedko, Skrigan and Vyachorka. The interlocutors agreed that the opposition should focus resources on a limited number of districts with the strongest candidates. Vyachorka brought up the idea of also campaigning on electoral reform, with a particular focus on the need to include independent members on local electoral commissions.

¶17. (C) The interlocutors argued for an active monitoring presence for the election, including both political party and independent monitors. Lebedko averred that efforts by former OSCE Minsk Head of Office Hans Georg Wieck to organize monitors from the Belarus Helsinki Commission and the human

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rights NGO Vyasma could take too literally the need for neutrality. Complete separation between the organizations and parties could prove difficult because of overlapping membership, Lebedko said. Vyachorka added that candidates would value monitors' activeness over their impartiality.

#### Difficulty Attracting Appealing Candidates?

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¶18. (C) Levkovich said that the recruitment of so-called VIPs from outside the UDF (ref C) yielded only three potential candidates. Other well-known figures had decided not to run, but had pledged to support the UDF list. Lebedko explained that with each successive election activists grew less and less interested in running for office, and party discipline became more important as a tool for finding candidates. Vyachorka stated that those ready to act already belonged to the parties. He offered that many of the potential candidates from his Belarusian National Front (BNF) were 25 or younger, and their main qualification was having run in 2007 local elections.

#### Comment: Acting to Broaden the Coalition

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¶19. (C) The UDF members clicked particularly well. Suggestions earlier in the year that the Communists would not cooperate actively on the European March and/or that BNF would not work on the Social March now appear off the mark. Significantly, none of the guests made even the mildest critique of former Presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, who had to send his regrets. While the opposition has its work cut out, cooperation within the UDF appears unusually high for a period between elections.

¶10. (C) Efforts to downplay the turnout for the Social March suggest the event will not meet organizers' initial expectations. Nonetheless, UDF cooperation on an event designed to draw new and non-traditional backers to the

opposition is significant in and of itself. The approach may in the end not bear much fruit in terms of increased support, but the opposition leaders are correct that it beats inaction or waiting until the eve of elections to criticize austerity measures.

¶111. (C) The leaders seem to understand they must mount some strong campaigns for the parliamentary elections. The regime will not allow independent members on local election commissions in any district with a respectable opposition candidate. This fact will serve as a succinct reminder to the international community that Lukashenko will not permit even minimally improved electoral practices for the sake of better relations with the West.

STEWART